

Social Responsibility: Challenges for the Future

The 2nd Annual AMSS-UK Conference, "Social Responsibility: Challenges for the Future," took place October 21–22 at the University of Westminster, London. Scholars from the United Kingdom, Ireland, Malaysia, the United States, Western Europe, and Turkey presented forty-two papers. Over one hundred participants attended the two-day event. The Conference featured scholars such as Malik Badri, Kamal Hassan, Murad Hofmann, Abdelwahab El-Affendi, in addition to emerging intellectuals such as Mashood A. Baderin and Fauzi Ahmad. The vital participation of graduate students and junior faculty at the AMSS-UK and the AMSS-US conference in Washington, DC, the prior weekend indicates the growing presence of Muslims in western academia.

Asad Ahmad was master of ceremonies and Yusuf El-Khoie from the Khoie Foundation gave the opening remarks. The keynote address inaugurated the conference and was followed by a plenary session. Paper sessions comprised the rest of the event with a "book launch" and final plenary session concluding the program Sunday afternoon.

Paper sessions were organized around various subthemes directly related to social responsibility and the future. Presenters reflected upon social welfare, the state, social policy and community development, law, health and social care, grassroots action, globalization and the media, education, and methodologies and gender. The direct link between the Conference theme and paper sessions encouraged a lucid and fertile ground for intense discussion, paving the way for an emerging discourse on social responsibility in Islam.

The keynote address was delivered by Kamal Hassan, rector, International Islamic University, Malaysia, and established the importance of scholars and academics in promoting social responsibility. He reflected upon the role of universities in promoting social responsibility under globalization. At present, universities are reacting to globalization by adopting a "corporatization of curriculum" and a "market driving" approach to edu-

cation to benefit the wealth of the nation. This “business paradigm” of education removes morality and responsibility from the educational experience. Muslim intellectuals, in particular, are encouraged to promote a moral and civilized vision of Islam in their academic environments that reflects a socially responsible agenda in scholarship. To do this, Muslims must embrace “renewed engagement with the public sphere.” Hassan submitted that religious universities, such as the International Islamic University, and Christian universities in the West, can provide examples of morally responsible scholarship to counteract the business of education increasingly found in many academic institutions.

The first plenary session followed the keynote and was chaired by Anas S. Al Shaikh-Ali, director of the International Institute of Islamic Thought, London. Discussants included Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, a noted columnist for the *Independent*, and Malik Badri, Professor at the International Islamic University, Malaysia. Alibhai-Brown reflected upon the role of popular culture and social responsibility, and the benefits and risks of Muslims who are public figures. She reminded the audience that a “sense of responsibility is not the same as the representation of responsibility.” Muslims must confront this dilemma at both the individual and community level. Malik Badri compared the concepts of secular social responsibility and Islamic altruism. Badri commented on the dangers of adopting modernity’s standards of human experience and the oversight of western psychology, which assumes humans are selfish by nature at the expense of spirituality. Spiritual elements of human expression cannot be ignored and must be used as standards in practicing social responsibility.

The second plenary session, chaired by Jeremy Hanzell Thomas, Director of Curriculum Development for the Book Foundation, concluded the conference on Sunday. Discussants included Shaikh-Ali with Bobby Sayyid providing the closing remarks. Shaikh-Ali reflected upon “Muslim Discourse in the West: Challenges for the Future,” where he emphasized the need for Muslims to develop an ummatic identity and go beyond the ethnic and racial boundaries that cause so much tension among Muslims in the UK. He stated that the cause of Islam in the West and our impact as scholars will suffer from the sectarian attitude many Muslims embody in their personal behavior and within their organizations. His call for cooperation and tolerance is a vital part of the “social and religious responsibility” of all Muslims. AMSS-UK, in its attempts to be inclusive and open to all Muslims, has provided a new example of cooperation for Muslims in the UK.

Several strong papers were presented throughout the weekend. Mohamed Mestiri from the International Institute of Islamic Thought, France, gave a thought-provoking paper, "Modern Political Responsibility: The State, Civil Society, and Challenges of Globalization," discussed how the "state," as the agent of social responsibility, is compromised under the new global regime of "economicracy." More often than not, the state is subsumed under geopolitical and economic pressures of globalization where social responsibility is increasingly dependant on individuals and agents in civil society. In both state practice and contemporary Islamic political thought, these emerging realities demand new responses to political authority and the state.

Gulfshan K. Alavi from the United States presented a cogent paper on "The Global Media System: Issues, Concerns and Opportunities." Alavi, who is a journalist with the United Nations, provided textual evidence of US influence in the global media machine. Even Muslim countries, she pointed out, are dependant on western sources of media information that demonize Muslims. She encouraged Muslim intellectuals to address this issue in hopes of increasing Muslim presence in the creation of media.

Fauzi Ahmad, researcher at the Department of Sociology at the University of Bristol, discussed the challenges facing Muslim women in academia in her paper, "Methodological Dilemmas, Tensions and Contradictions in Theorising South Asian Muslim Women." Ahmad contended that racism is rampant within academic environments where colleagues are sometimes hostile to the very presence of the intellectual Muslim woman. Additionally, colleagues often consider her research on the Muslim community as not "good enough," as she is an insider. She attributed the attitudes of her peers to fear of critical engagement and inability to "grapple with the other." These dilemmas are reflected in the experiences of other Muslim women in the social sciences in the UK and North America.

Mashood A. Baderin, who is completing his Ph.D. research in International and Comparative Human Rights Law at the University of Nottingham, delivered an engaging paper on human rights and Islamic Law. Baderin's paper, "Establishing Common Grounds between Islamic Law and International Human Rights as a Means to an Ethical Universal Humanism" was an exhaustive review of the discourse of human rights in Islamic and western law. Baderin disputed the myth that human rights are

a creation of the West and painstakingly reviewed Qur'anic and Shari'ah concepts of "rights" and "duties" to others.

The conference also featured panels related to community issues. Sophie Gilliat-Ray presented an excellent paper on the historical and present condition of Muslim Chaplaincy in the UK in her paper, "British Muslim Involvement in Chaplaincy." One highly interesting panel focused on "Health and Social Care." This panel discussed mental health, Islamic holistic medicine, and issues of social responsibility for Muslim doctors practicing in the West. A panel on "Education and Social Responsibility" provided the forum to discuss the importance of Islamic schools and educational options for Muslims in the UK.

One unique highlight of this event was the book launch on Sunday, which enabled scholars to discuss and promote their new books. The following books were launched: *Contemplation, an Islamic Psychospiritual Study* by Malik Badri; *Social Justice in Islam* by Deina Ali Abdelkader; *The Environmental Dimension of Islam* by Mawil Izzi Dien; *Building a New Society: An Islamic Approach to Social Change* by Zahid Parvez; and Muhammad Al-Ghazali's *A Thematic Commentary on the Qur'an*, discussed by Bustamy Khir.

The 2nd Annual AMSS-UK Conference was met with increasing enthusiasm and participation from Muslim academics in the UK. The hard work of IIIT-UK is evident in the quality of papers and the growing interest in AMSS by Muslims in Europe. This conference, in addition to the successful AMSS-US event a week earlier, sets an exciting stage for AMSS at a global level.

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